



## Where We Have Gone Before: Star Trek Into and Out of Darkness

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### Abstract

Star Trek functions as a religion though its universe is explicitly humanistic and secular. Star Trek Into Darkness offers an interpretation of 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While the creators may not have intended the film as a religious text, it offers an analysis of what happened, a set of responses, pointing to a path forward, incorporating those events into the Star Trek (and ultimately our own) universe. I will offer a close reading of Star Trek Into Darkness that explores the negotiation of what it means to be human and our place in the post- 9/11 world. My thesis is that the film can be read as implicitly religious in two senses. First, it offers a vision of what is human in the face of questions of terrorism and pre-emptive strikes, duty and honor, life and death. Second, it offers viewers a reflection on possible responses to 9/11 and the aftermath, pointing forward. It is a secular homily on being human in the past, present, and future.

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## Introduction

Science Fiction is generally understood as the attempt to imagine unimaginable futures. But its deepest subject may in fact be our own historical present. (Jameson 2007,345)

Edward Bailey's concept, implicit religion, creates a space for exploring religious commitments in explicitly secular forms by focusing on the ways that those things are treated as "sacred", "holy" and "human." Bailey specifically highlights the "contemporary belief in the Human" having a trans-cendent quality as a significant element of implicit religion. (Bailey 1998, 21) The Voyages of the Starship Enterprise (and her sister ships) have been part of American culture for nearly 50 years and their following has shown no signs of diminishing. In fact, Star Trek (hereafter ST) has grown into a global phenomenon, with an international viewership. Gene Roddenberry, the creator of ST, was himself a dedicated humanist and "confessed," if you will, that he was attempting to

make ST a humanist show, despite some serious push back from the network. In the end, however, Roddenberry affirmed ST's humanistic impulses: "Star Trek was about people. I think this is the main reason the program was so successful. What is more inter-esting than people?" (Alexander 1991, web). I would contend it is not only "about people": Star Trek is about being human. There is an emphasis on being human, as an absolute, in ST in its various incarnations.

Michael Jindra argues that Star Trek and ST fandom function as a religion, embodying a religious outlook, with an underlying ideology and myth, contending fans see ST as a "sign of hope for the future...the future of the collective 'we,' our society, our species" (Jindra 2005,170). His focus is primarily on its fandom, and how fans interpret the ST universe, and act in the world employing those values and worldview.

Jennifer Porter expands this view of ST fandom:

Fan communities are, or at least can be, places that embody a person's and/ or a community's expression of what it means to be human, to be in community, to be in space and time, to be moral or immoral, to be finite or eternal, to simply be. Implicit religion underpins ardent pop culture fandom, just as it underpins ardent explicit religion. (Porter 2009,271)

Roddenberry's belief in progress, in humanistic solutions to various challenges, his ideals of Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combination, and his dedication to explore and encounter cultures and other peoples, are values that ST fans have taken up and expanded for themselves.

Both of these perspectives on ST's influence on fans and popular culture help shed light on the events in JJ Abrams' recent ST offering, *Star Trek Into Darkness* (hereafter STID). This film provides its viewers with a set of human responses to loss, fear, death, and the anxiety of an unpredictable world, ultimately giving viewers an interpretation of events and some hope for going forward in the post 9/11 world. In this article I will argue STID discusses the questions of preemptive strikes and terrorism, duty and honor, and providing viewers and fans with a space to reflect on many possible responses to 9/11 and the aftermath, ultimately pointing to a direction out of darkness and into the future, a return to values of transparency, rule of law, and progress.

Abrams' movies (the first ST reboot film and STID) are alternative universe stories, fan-fiction-like works that do not create new characters and new situations but take beloved characters and put them in a new configuration of familiar circumstances, friends and enemies, known from a different context. These situations are drawn from our real present world and connected to the ST universe as Abrams' Kirk and Enterprise crew are closely connected to their previous incarnations. Star Trek The Original Series (hereafter ST: TOS) brought together Americans, Russians, Africans, and Japanese

men and women, in a transnational crew to explore the universe. This first crew showed the possibilities of working together for the common good without national, economic or ideological conflicts between earthlings: instead projecting those problems outward and resolving them (at least in a surface fashion).

STID has the same transnational crew, the same unified planet Earth going into the universe, but the threat is not necessarily “out there.” Abrams’ vision of the crew, still multicultural (though national identity is really only present in Chekov’s lingering Russian accent), are made new by the changed world of our twenty-first century, post-cold war globe. In Abrams vision the crew face different challenges: the enemies of ST: TOS are re-imagined in a world without Mutually Assured Destruction. These films are connected to our present, which is their past, and thereby the films imagine ‘new futures’ and mediate the relationship between the present and the future. Ivan Csicsery-Ronay argues that Science Fiction “is *imaginary prediction*, drawing on the same sort of historical-projective suspension of disbelief as the real thing, if only to explore, to problematize, and to play with it (Csicsery-Ronay 2011, 78—79). This is precisely what STID does: the film explores the post 9/11 world, problematizes our responses as embodied by Kirk and the Enterprise crew, and plays with possible resolutions, offering both comfort and hope, as well as a reminder of the potential and costly consequences of our choices.

Each incarnation of ST does have some similar features and is an invitation to engage and solve problems through human ingenuity, progress, and compassionate action. JJ Abrams’ ST crew reincarnates the original characters, adding twists to beloved storylines and adding new possibilities and fresh looks at ST tropes. The two films envision beloved characters in the post-Cold War world of global terrorism and militarized techno-science.

Stephen McVeigh convincingly argues that JJ Abrams’ first ST film is a way of processing the President George W. Bush approach to the world. Kirk is able to operate on instinct alone, unfettered by reason and is completely right, successful, and triumphant.

This is not the type of heroism displayed by Kirk in the original series, a heroism predicated upon duty and responsibility to his ship and all the souls aboard her. Kirk, the Cold Warrior, finds his will constrained by the military structures he is bound by, and his personality mediated between the extremes of logic and emotion mediated by Spock and McCoy. In J.J. Abrams’ reworking of Kirk, however, he is removed from such constraints, unbound, and is able to act instinctively, from the gut and without interference.

(McVeigh 2010,210)

The second film picks up on Kirk's self-assuredness, his reckless dependence on instinct and his luck, and turns it on its head.

STID is based on a particularly poignant storyline in the ST: TOS time-line by bringing back an iconic villain and tackling one of the biggest questions in the ST universe, the question of the common good: the needs of the many versus the needs of the few. What Abrams and Company bring to the potlatch is not only a set of updated special effects but also a series of updated concerns. In 1968 ST: TOS gave the US its first televised inter-racial kiss, in the midst of the civil rights movement and the wake of the Freedom Summer of 1964. In 2013 STID offers an interpretation of 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Iran and Afghanistan, just as socially relevant and controversial as ST: TOS. Abrams and company did purpose-fully engage the issues of the war by dedicating the film to "our post-9/11 veterans with gratitude for their inspired service abroad and continued leadership at home" (STID).

There is also an implicit religious content. While the writer, director and producers of the film may not have intended it to function as a religious text, like many other star trek writers and directors, Abrams and his team drew upon the resources, tropes and interests of religion in order to engage issues of ultimate concern, covering a range of responses: How do human beings react to traumatic loss? The film offers an analysis of how a war was started, plausible explanations for responsibility and blame, and points to a path forward, presenting fictional events with poignant similarity to the 9/11 attacks, into the ST universe. This depiction of the events, with its nods to power structures, deep history, and militarized technology, refracts the present, analogizing the contemporary United States. This reading of our present as history confers a sense of meaning on the present and of purpose for the future. By making our present their past, and inviting us to see other possibilities for dealing with traumatic losses, the viewer can experience and experiment with a variety of very human anxieties and responses with the STID crew.

Fredric Jameson's insightful observation that science fiction defamiliarizes and restructures our experience of the present in a way that is distinctive from all other forms of defamiliarization, highlights what is so powerful about STID and the events it depicts.

For the apparent realism, or representationality, of SF has concealed another, far more complex temporal structure: not to give us "images" of the future...but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present, and to do so in specific ways distinct from all other forms of defamiliarization. (Jameson 2007, 286)

STID is thus a kind of familiar defamiliarization: using beloved characters, heroes, anti-heroes, and organizations, it tells us about our world, and in so doing guides an interpretation of the world that is based in reality and something a bit more, a bit beyond

reality. One of the most appealing values of science fiction can be found in its ability to provide new ways to see the present as well as the future.

### The film

The opening scene of STID is striking for a number of reasons: the use of primary colors, the suspenseful music, the re-establishing of all the key relationships aboard the Enterprise, and the emphasis on the one rule of *The United Federation of Planets: The Prime Directive of Non-Interference*. Despite all the frenetic action in the opening sequence, the allusion to Islam is clear: not so much implicit here, as directly indicated. The native people are strikingly different from our heroes, who were able to hide in their midst by wearing something that looks much like a *burqa*, the blue fabric obscuring their identities (surely someone noticed the strangers, prior to Kirk stealing their scroll?). As for the “indigenous” even their gender is not readily apparent (or else all the indigenous are male), though one is carrying an infant. The natives of Nibiru are uniform in appearance and act in concert, chasing Kirk through the red jungle until he exposes their written text, a text that McCoy and Kirk have no knowledge of or do not understand. In a concise exchange, McCoy asks “What the hell did you take?” and Kirk responds, “I have no idea but they were bowing to it,” as he unfurls the scroll on a convenient tree branch. The indigenous stop their chase and fall down as a group, in a position remarkably like the Muslim prayer position *sujud*, in front of the scroll. It is impossible to miss the allusion, though it is obscured by the action and by the narrative danger to Spock. The natives’ uniform white pallor and yellow clothes present a people who are seemingly unindividualized, in contrast to our heroes, and whose response to the impending eruption of the volcano is implied to be prayer, rather than escape. Their temple is built at the base of the volcano, too: surely too close to survive a lava flow.

In contrast to the primitive beliefs and practices of the natives, science triumphs over religion in a brilliant act of cold fusion that prevents the extinction of a people and the destruction of a planet, a destruction that their religion was apparently unable to prevent (or, possibly, had predicted). As the Enterprise departs, the indigenous see the ship and are in a state of shock as their temple is destroyed by stray debris from the volcano, and of awe at the rapidly departing starship that rose from the ocean and races toward the stars. Mouths agape, they stare at the departing ship. The last the viewer sees of the aboriginal people, their scroll is crumpled on the ground, disregarded and seemingly forgotten, as the leader draws an image of the Enterprise in the red sand of the now preserved planet, and the people fall into the prayer position in front of the etched Enterprise. Science has, in a way consistent with ST universe, trumped or at least challenged religion, and the competition between science and religion is introduced (accidentally? inevitably?) to another culture.

The first scene is a colonialist narrative, though there is no obvious benefit to the Enterprise crew for saving the planet and its inhabitants (no “unobtainium” here, ala James Cameron’s *Avatar*). The acts of the crew to stop the volcano’s eruption, and thereby preserve the planet for further ‘study’ and exploration, are presented as “the right thing to do,” even though it violates the Prime Directive. This is an expression of a technoscientific empire, solving all problems near and far through scientific technology (Csicsery-Ronay, 2009). It is, in one scene, everything imperial and colonialist about the

ST universe: all the criticisms of ST and manifest destiny displayed in a 10 minute introduction (Hemmingson 2009). The “natives” are “saved” from their own lack of scientific development by the humans for seemingly altruistic reasons, and in so doing the intrusion is exposed but for the right reasons, saving both Spock and the indigenous inhabitants of Nibiru. However, the natives are forever changed, so changed they forsake their religion for the mysterious ship from the stars, at once a symbol of science and technology conquering nature and religion, though how the natives will go forward with an interpretation of this encounter is unclear. There is an implication that a new mythology was born that day, a transformation of a culture and a people who will never be able to go back to their pre-Enterprise world.

However, none of the possible consequences *for the natives* are directly relevant to the plot of the film itself. What is directly relevant to the film are directly is the crucial exchange between Spock and Kirk while Spock is in the volcano. Spock, proclaiming one of the most important phrases in the ST universe, “the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few,” faces and accepts what appears to be his imminent death. To his last breath, he insists that the Prime Directive cannot be broken for any reason. Kirk, of course, and consistent with his impulsive style from the first film, breaks the rule twice over, saving Spock and saving the planet, with all its teeming flora and fauna. Confident that he has done the right thing, Kirk shrugs off any possible negative consequences of his actions. (See McVeigh 2009 for further discussion of this aspect of Kirk’s leadership style.)

There is another way to read that scene, that final moment in the introduction where the Enterprise is drawn in the sand. If we view this film as a kind of religious text itself, then what we have also seen is the restatement ST’s humanistic philosophy, working together for the good of the many and the few, preserving life throughout the galaxy, through progress, technology and science. As the indigenous leader draws the outline of the Enterprise, this image of the ship invites the viewer in, tells her/him that s/he is following the Enterprise on its journey, invoking the primary symbol of the ST universe, inviting the viewer to join Kirk and the crew on the ship, assuring her/him of her/his place in the world where techno-science saves the one *and* the many. The Enterprise is a vehicle which will allow interpretation, integration and ultimately understanding of the world, and the viewers are following this beloved ship and her crew into the unknown. It’s the procession, the call to community, as ST fans and even casual viewers are now immersed in the symbol system of the world of ST. We are situated, we are following the Enterprise back to the world we know, that is also the world we do not know, into darkness.

The plot of STID is that “John Harrison” (who is revealed to be another ST: TOS character, Khan Noonian Singh), a “rogue Starfleet officer,” instigates an attack on Starfleet Headquarters in San Francisco, after an initial attack on a Starfleet installation in London. An explosion in London ripples to an attack on San Francisco, establishing both Starfleet’s global reach and home turf. “It is quite obvious...that notions like ‘federations of planets’ and ‘melting pots’ as imagined, for instance, in the Star Trek series, are not free from a very specific cultural bias” (Martin-Albo 2011, 102). Starfleet is situated in San Francisco, grounding the leadership of ST’s global, multicultural,

multi-world empire securely in the United States (if far from both New York and Washington, DC). White men are overwhelmingly present in Starfleet leadership, though Spock is (re)assigned to an African-American captain. Beyond Uhura, there are no women shown in positions of power in this vision of the Federation.

This is an action-filled film that is punctuated with key moments from ST: TOS occurring in this new timeline that offers insight into the way the crew of the Enterprise deal with the attacks and exhibiting many possible responses, from cool-headed analysis to passionate lust for vengeance. One of those key moments is when Spock confesses to his understandably enraged significant other, Uhura, that he did, in fact, care about the potential end of his life. He recounts his experience during a mind-meld with Captain Pike. As Spock experienced Pike's last moments of his life through a mind-meld, Spock admits he felt "anger, confusion, loneliness and fear" which he had felt even more intensely at the death of his home planet of Vulcan (in the first film). Spock confesses that he chose never to feel that way again. He claims he can manage to disregard his feelings rather than acknowledge fear and ultimately helplessness in the face of death. This denial of emotion, a psychologically improbable response for almost all humans, is significant throughout the film, and particularly for those who might see Spock's dispassionate approach to life as laudable.

STID's Kirk was demoted: he lost his rank and his ship as a consequence of his actions in the first scene. His father figure, Commander Pike, reprimands him. The reasons for this rebuke surprise Kirk. In the confrontation, Pike asked him what was to be learned and Kirk's response is flippant. However, Kirk's dressing-down is full of uncomfortable truths: "You lied, on an official report, you lied. And you think the rules don't apply to you...You were supposed to survey a planet, not alter its destiny," Pike tells him. Kirk is blindsided by the reprimand and refuses to acknowledge that he might have erred. In the end, Pike stands up for Kirk and keeps him in Starfleet, but that reprieve is short-lived. Pike dies in Khan's attack and Kirk is cut adrift, shattered by the loss and the blow to his career.

Admiral Marcus, another ST: TOS character, emerges as the head of Starfleet. Kirk and company learn that the San Francisco Starfleet Command center was attacked by a super-soldier from the past, created to fight another war in another time. Two things are revealed in the plot at this point, portents of other wars. First, Marcus points Starfleet toward revenge against this soldier from the past. "In the name of those we lost you will run this bastard down. This is a man hunt pure and simple," Marcus tells assembled Starfleet officers in the wake of the London attack (STID). But the course of this man-hunt could lead to war with the Klingons, as Khan is hiding in a province "uninhabited for decades," on their homeworld of Kronos. (STID) The Klingons are a distant and relatively unknown enemy but one, we are told, that has acted aggressively toward the Federation. Second, when objections are raised that the hunt for Khan could result in a violation of Klingon territory, and (if discovered) lead to war, Admiral Marcus states that war with the Klingons is "inevitable," and has possibly "already begun." This potential war is a risk, but one presented as an unlikely consequence. Kirk, devastated and blinded by the loss of Captain Pike, becomes the perfect tool for Marcus' military ambitions, and sets off to find Harrison/Khan.



Spock raises two significant objections to the parameters of this mission to hunt and assassinate Khan. He forcefully reminds Kirk that there is no Starfleet regulation that “condemns a man to die without a trial.” He then reminds Kirk that “pre-emptively firing torpedoes,” in order to eliminate Khan, goes against Starfleet values and is “morally wrong” (STID). These objections do not deter Kirk; in fact, he barely acknowledges them.

Following on the heels of Spock’s objection that pre-emptively firing weapons is immoral, and his suggestion that Kirk takes time to reflect on the possibility of war and the consequences of executing Khan without due process or any process at all, Scotty offers the next logical response to Kirk’s headlong rush to vengeance. Because he will not allow the torpedoes aboard the Enterprise, Scotty rejects Kirk’s reactionary, vengeful response, resisting the possibility of war and voicing objections to any blind trust in authority. Scotty resigns rather than violating his conscience over the issue of weapons of unknown provenance, refusing to rely on Kirk’s and Starfleet Commands assurances about the 72 weapons (of mass destruction). While Kirk pressures him to take on faith the importance of the torpedoes and assures him that these are “our orders,” Scotty expresses his doubts forcefully about the weapons, their payload and the danger they pose to the ship and the crew. Kirk had already silenced all the objections raised by Spock and McCoy, and Scotty raises another set of issues for Kirk to (re)consider. Scotty resigns, an act of protest that shows his commitment to his values over his status, standing by his principles rather than violating his conscience. Kirk ignores all his primary advisers in his quest for vengeance.

After Kahn is found and surrenders (for reasons unbeknown to Kirk), Kirk exhausts himself beating Kahn, venting his rage and sense of loss. However, the two reach an understanding and forge an alliance of sorts based on the reason that Kahn gives for his attack on Starfleet: to protect his crew, a group of people he calls his family. “My crew is my family. Is there anything you would not do for your family?,” Kahn asks Kirk. Through the action scenes and battle sequences, a series of changing alliances moves the plot along. At a crucial moment, after being betrayed by both Marcus and Khan, Kirk realizes the point of Pike’s last conversation with him and Khan’s rhetorical question from the brig: “Is there anything you won’t do for your family?” He recognizes that the needs of the many (his crew) outweigh the needs of the one, himself, and he performs the requisite sacrifice.

Key moments in the film address Kirk’s transformation from a reactionary to trying to “do the right thing,” even though he is not certain what that is—killing Khan? bringing him to trial for his actions?—to a recognition that there are people whose lives are in his hands and therefore he must act with care. And as a reflection of reactions in the decade after 9/11 these seem to be a series of stages that the viewer could relate to, could see as a reflection of her/himself, her/his own desires for revenge, and the realization that perhaps it is prudent to let a cooler head prevail, to question and discover for her/himself possible truths. The film is functioning on two levels at least. On the one hand, it is discussing the questions of pre-emptive strikes and terrorism, duty and honor. And on the other level it is offering ST viewers and fans a reflection of the possible responses to 9/11 and the aftermath. Kirk’s desire is to extract a price from the

attackers, by any means necessary. Spock, more reasonable and logical, if dispassionate, approaches the problem through the rule of law and transparency. Scotty resigns rather than violating his principles, protesting the use of military force before knowing the facts of the situation. Each of these characters represents different reactions, and a range of human responses to the attack. How can we hold parties accountable for an attack on those we love, yet stand by our values of fair trials, honesty and transparency? Kirk moves from his position of utter certainty and faith in his instincts to strike back at Khan, to doubt and to the consideration of a choice between less than optimum options. "I have no idea what I'm supposed to do. I only know what I can do," Kirk tells Spock, as he reconsiders his initial response (STID). What Kirk finally does is take responsibility for his impetuous actions, by saving the ship and the crew, at great cost to himself.

Kirk performs an act of self-sacrifice, giving his life to save the lives of those on the Enterprise. And as he faces his death, he tells Spock he feels the same things we heard Spock say he would not allow himself to feel again. Kirk pleads with Spock to tell him how not to feel afraid. Spock raises his hand to Kirk's in the most iconic and emotionally-charged gesture of the film, an expression of dedication, friendship, love and loss, and one of the important symbols in the ST universe. Spock admits that he, too, feels those fears and cannot NOT feel them. And the viewer her/himself can now also recognize that s/he, too, is afraid. This is the human response, the Vulcan response, the only response to the terrible reality of death and the value of the one life that was sacrificed for the salvation of many.

Kirk, so self-assured and confident at the beginning of the film, is now expressing a set of emotions that are not typically associated with him, with leaders, or with space explorers, but are part of the human experience: fear of dying, loneliness, and worry that those we love are safe and well. Spock, too, after his admission that he chooses not to feel certain emotions, particularly those very emotions expressed by Kirk, recognizes that he too is afraid and uncertain and cannot "choose" to not feel. Here are all these human responses—rage, fear, caution, anxiety, manipulation—that STID negotiates. And so James Tiberius Kirk dies the death of a captain, sacrificing himself for his crew, his family, for the good of the many.

This is a sensible ending for a film about 9/11 but this is a science fiction film and one that has already shown, in two separate scenes, the resolution of Kirk's not-quite-demise. What saves Kirk at the end of the film, the resurrection if you will, is accomplished by incorporating Khan's blood into Kirk's. We have seen this is possible in the scene that starts all the pieces moving—Khan's blood saves Thomas Harewood's child in the first act. A recurring theme of the film is acted out ("Is there anything you won't do for your family?") as Harewood sacrifices himself, and the people in the London Kelvin facility, for his child. Kirk is now permanently marked by Khan, not only through facing his fear of death, recognizing that the needs of the many do outweigh the needs of the few, but by being saved by the blood of the very super-soldier from the past that so threatened his world in the present. Calling it a Eucharist is going too far, though there is an element of being transformed by the blood of a post-human soldier, incorporating the "uncivilized" essence into a more 'civilized' time that will mark Kirk as

he goes forward. And as he awakens from his beyond-neardeath-experience, Kirk hears Pike's voice say, "I dare you to do better."

As all good narratives must do, STID ties up its loose ends in a final scene at a rebuilt Starfleet headquarters. The Enterprise crew is back together, the ship repaired, and the world is (mostly) recovered from the attacks and the losses, moving onward, as is time's wont. Kirk addresses the assembled members of Starfleet:

There will always be those who mean to do us harm. To stop them we risk awakening the same evil within ourselves. Our first instinct is to seek revenge when those we love are taken from us. But that's not who we are. We are here today to rechristen the USS Enterprise and honor those who lost their lives nearly one year ago.... [This is a] *call for us to remember who we once were and who we must be again*. (STID, my emphasis)

Kirk offers this benediction to us, the viewers. He calls on us to do better, not to repeat the mistakes of the past and not to allow the injuries we have endured to make us less than we can be. Here, at the end of the film, we are returned to the beginning of Star Trek, the beginning of the 5 year mission. Kirk's benediction has brought the viewers through the danger zone, his own transformation now parallel to that of the viewer. The viewer incorporates the changes in the world and finds a way to go forward, remembering who s/he is, who Kirk is, what her/his values are and what Kirk's values are (returned to), and everyone, viewer and crew alike, are now prepared to face "Space the Final Frontier...." Kirk's speech is both an explanation of the new world and a benediction to send us forward, remembering who we once were and who we must be again. They —we—must resist the temptations of vengeance in the future and hold fast to our values, our identity, remembering who we are and who we can be.

Star Trek Into Darkness is a journey through space and time, following human responses to loss, death and terrorism. Viewers can reflect, identify, disagree with, and incorporate these responses, experiencing a kind of catharsis through the film. Starting with the question of the good of the many, rules and the often high cost of adhering to them, STID goes through the terror of terrorism and responses that are founded on gut instinct and reaction. The consequences of the tempestuous rush to vengeance are grave and recovery from them is slow. But the crew and the viewers emerge with a newly remembered realization that the only way to move forward is through a complicated and challenging adherence to core values even in the face of horror. In the guise of the future, STID has passed through a defamiliarized and restructured present, daring us to do better in the future.

## **Conclusion**

To paraphrase Samuel R. Delany, science fiction reflects, focuses, and diffracts relations between humans and the universe, as it includes other people, the breadth of human creations, and what humans are capable of imagining. This ability to express humanity's various conditions is found in science fiction's language, its connection to poetry, its use of symbolism (Delany calls it "symbolistic"), and the impulse of the genre to affirm the human condition. This affirmation does not guarantee happy endings or

facile solutions to human situations, but rather is found in a desire to express multiple visions of human origins, trajectories and destinations (Delany 2011). In many ways, STID is an action film set in a familiar universe. But it uses treasured symbols to explore human relations, interpersonal and psychological, expressing a range of emotions, responses, conditions, and possibilities.

This is what religion often does: negotiates what it means to be human. However, definitions of religion are frequently fraught with questions about Gods and beliefs, indicating a Protestant-centric, post-Enlightenment emphasis. David Chidester, challenging that way of reading religion, offers a different kind of understanding of religion, one that appreciates popular culture's role as a carrier of religious impulses and ideas. He emphasizes the aspect of human participation, highlighting the ways humans are situated in worldviews: "Classification and orientation, person and place, are inevitably negotiated in religion and popular culture" (Chidester 2005, 19). What STID does is situate the viewer with a particular group of persons—with Kirk and the Enterprise crew—and then put them in a particular place, one that is experiencing terrorism, impending wars, questionable weapons, and imperialism both foreign (Klingons) and domestic. STID provides a range of responses to these circumstances, a situation that "enables human beings [in this case Kirk and company] to experiment in human possibility...but not necessarily under conditions of their own making" (Chidester 2005, 221). The film offers an action-filled meditation on human responses to loss, death, war, and a future that incorporates these responses and chooses a path forward.

In a provocative essay about political reporting in the *New York Times*, Maureen Barr (2011,199) argues that a knowledge of science fiction language is necessary to understand political reporting in the post-[George W.] Bush 43 United States. She expands her argument, suggesting that "science fiction language becomes politics" (Barr 2011, 190). Barr documents the use of many science fiction terms, such as "alternate universe" and "time-space continuum," and references to Spock and Darth Vader in political reporting from 2006 to 2010. She concludes (2011,190) that science fiction "enhances viewing political reality in a positive and constructive way." STID demonstrates that Barr's thesis is not only correct, but also suggests that our national psyche is processing our current geopolitical situation through the use of science fiction language and tropes. Yet I would expand Barr's thesis somewhat by bringing in the implicitly religious connotations of science fiction. For the link between politics and religion in science fiction is found precisely in the overtly secular ways in which science fiction envisions the future of humanity, incorporating science, religion, and politics into a commitment to a potent mixture of humanistic values and ideals.

STID is not a perfect analogy for 9/11 or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, obviously. We do not have warp drives, super-soldiers, or cryo-tubes. Abrams, Orci, Kurtzman, and Lindelof can tell a good story, one of ambition, desire, and self-transformation, ensconced in state-of-the-art special effect explosions and action sequences. On the one hand, STID makes our present their past, discussing the questions of pre-emptive strikes and terrorism, duty and honor. And on the other hand ST viewers and fans have been led to reflect on possible responses to 9/11 and its aftermath through the medium of the film. The film ends up reminding viewers of their path, pointing forward. While

profoundly secular, the film is also a homily on commitments, a meditation on values and ideals, on the past and the future, on what it means to be human. STID utilizes a set of symbols to reflect on our current situation and the world we inhabit, and on the world we are creating, pointing to the life of the world to come.

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